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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 005798

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON FOREIGN MINISTER
SHALOM

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In their introductory meeting September 25, Foreign Minister Shalom told Ambassador Jones that the United States remains Israel's best friend and that he hopes for continued USG support to expand Israel's ties to the Arab world, an area on which he has focused. He offered no prediction on Monday's Likud Central Committee vote, other than to say that a high turnout would benefit Sharon. He called for Israel's inclusion in the visa waiver program. He also thanked the USG for its support in pressuring Iran on its nuclear program. ED SUMMARY.

2. (C) Shalom was equivocal on the prospects for Prime Minister Sharon to avoid a Likud Central Committee decision calling for early primaries. He cited three groups as among those who are using the primaries issue to oppose Sharon: a group led by Natan Sharansky that is still angry over Sharon's refusal to appoint Sharansky head of the Jewish Agency; the followers of "extremist" Moshe Feiglin; and the "founders," or elderly Likud founding members who simply cannot change their fundamental stance. He numbers the total of those groups at some 500 to 600 of the Central Committee's 2,500 members. He suggested that if more than 90 percent of Central Committee members vote, Sharon "has a chance" of avoiding early primaries. If fewer than 80 percent vote, it will "not be good."

3. (C) Shalom called on PA President Mahmoud Abbas to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and to stop Hamas and PIJ attacks on Israel. Shalom said that he has many times pointed out that progress depends on what happens in Gaza, and right now, it looks like it's not working. He cited the risk to progress from even a single high-casualty attack on Israelis, terming it very risky for the future. He pointed to recent Hamas statements reiterating the organization's call for the destruction of Israel and the "full liberation" of Palestinian lands, arguing that previous agreements with the Palestinians (the Oslo accords) prohibit the participation in the political process of parties that call for Israel's destruction.

4. (C) Ambassador Jones responded that the USG and Israel need to develop a strategy that weakens Hamas and PIJ and strengthens the PA, and find a way for those people willing to take part peacefully in the political process to do so, while eliminating the violent component. The Ambassador noted that the Secretary had spoken with Abbas the day before, calling on him once again to denounce the Hamas attacks and take action to stop terror. Abbas has responded with the right words, he added, but words have to be matched by deeds. Shalom agreed.

5. (C) Shalom pointed out his recent activities to enhance ties with Arab countries, and indicated without further elaboration that talks, mostly confidential, are ongoing with many countries. He said Israel has no conflict with the broader Arab world -- not on territory and not on economic issues. He cited the Gulf countries as being the most promising targets for improved relations -- he cited Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Dubai -- and suggested that Morocco "needs some push," which he said he hopes the U.S. administration will undertake. Shalom said he will be traveling to Tunisia with the Israeli minister of communications for a November 16-18 conference and expects to visit Morocco shortly thereafter. He also noted Israel's participation in the Barcelona Process meeting in Barcelona some two weeks after the Tunis event, referred to positive indications from Indonesia, and pointed out that Pakistan President Musharraf faced only minor public demonstrations following public meetings between Shalom and the Pakistani foreign minister in Turkey. Asked about the situation in Lebanon via a vis the LAF taking control of the south from Hizballah, the Ambassador said he sees little chance for LAF action as long as President Lahoud remains in office. Lahoud he noted, was an ally of Syria, and once headed the Lebanese armed forces. The LAF are thus unlikely to take any action toward Hizballah without his endorsement.

6. (C) On bilateral relations, Shalom said he hopes for a Joint Political Military Group (JPMG) session in the near future and for resumption of the Strategic Dialogue. He noted that MFA DG Ron Prosor had discussed the resumption of the Strategic Dialogue recently with U/S Burns in Washington. He termed the bilateral economic dialogue "very good," and

said he hoped for talks on major issues to move to twice a year and to involve "daily contact" with USG interlocutors. For instance, he said, Israel has proposed twice-yearly meetings with Secretary Rice, an idea that he understands USG officials view favorably. He also cited as a strong tie the bilateral trade relationship that he said now amounts to USD 20 billion annually, but added that he hopes for stronger cooperation in high tech areas.

17. (C) Shalom called for new USG consideration of Israel's request to be included in the visa waiver program, an issue he has pushed since becoming foreign minister. Shalom said that he understands that the 92 to 94 percent issuance rate precludes Israel's participation in the program, but suggested that what he believes is a higher refusal rate for Israeli Arabs is skewing the issuance/refusal rate against Israel. The Ambassador doubted there was such discrimination, but observed lower-income applicants sometimes have a harder time showing lasting ties to their countries of origin. Shalom was quick to acknowledge this and distance himself from any allegation of discrimination.

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JONES